

How Should Societies Counteract Overpopulation?

By **Rachel Robison-Greene** - Mar 17, 2017



"Crowd" by James Cridland is licensed under CC BY 2.0 (via Flickr)

As the human population continues to grow, questions arise concerning how to deal with problems that are human in origin: problems like pollution and environmental degradation, resource depletion, and global food shortages. The global population, which currently sits at over **7 billion**, is expected to reach **10.9 billion** by the end of the century.

As populations increase, the rate of greenhouse gas emissions also increases. Topsoil depletion that took place between the years 1900 and 2000 was equal to the depletion that took place **in the 1000 years that preceded it**. As a result, land that is suitable for agriculture becomes more and more scarce and our ability to produce enough food for climbing populations is threatened.

Not all countries have populations that are expanding at the same rate. The population of the least developed countries is expected to double or possibly even triple by **2050**. By contrast, developed countries are likely to experience rates of growth that are significantly lower. Some countries, like **Japan** and **Spain**, are actually experiencing decreases in population.

These threats make the issue of how to deal with overpopulation quite pressing. Some feel that problems posed by overpopulation are so severe that they require swift action on the part of governments and international organizations. Others feel that, though there is a moral obligation to address the problems that come from growing populations, the obligation falls on the individual and not on the government.

Some countries have acted out of concern that overpopulation issues will have significant economic impacts on countries that continue to grow at unsustainable rates. In 1979, China enacted a policy that made it the case that Han Chinese individuals were permitted to have only one child. China's policy was the subject of resentment both within the country and throughout the world. The imposition of fines and the occurrence of **forced abortions** raised questions internationally about the appropriateness of governmental intervention into the intimate reproductive lives of their citizens.

Technological and medical progress, paired with increased access to health care, has also led to a growing demographic of older human beings. In the next three decades, **90 million** people are expected to leave China's work

force. Because of the one child policy, there will not be enough young people to replace them. China is now fearful that the policy might have generated disastrous consequences for their economy.

In light of these problems, China increased its child limit to two children in 2015. One problem that they face is that the country is now dealing with a population that has been raised under the one child policy. Their set of values and life expectations has been partially framed by the understanding that they are only permitted to have one child.

Many Han Chinese in the childbearing demographic recognize that having children is an expensive prospect, and plenty of them don't plan on having any children at all.

In response to these concerns, China is considering a plan to provide **financial incentives** for couples to have two children. According to a 2015 survey, 60% of Han Chinese couples were opposed to having a second child because of financial constraints. Incentives in the form of subsidies and birth rewards are being considered as a way of offsetting the costs involved.

Overpopulation creates serious problems that affect us all. The appropriate way of dealing with the issue is not obvious, however. Despite the severity of the consequences of our reproductive choices, they are some of the most intimate and personal choices that we make as human beings. Many people think that the intimate nature of these choices draws a clear moral line that forbids intrusion by the government. These considerations are often motivated by the underlying idea that every person has a fundamental right to pursue their own conception of the good. Some people view raising their own biological children as indispensable to living a good life. Others claim that, even if raising children is, for many, a crucial part of living a good life, the children need not be biologically related to the parents. There are plenty of children who would benefit from adoption.

Others argue that these problems are much too severe to be dealt with on a purely individual basis. Many people do not yet live in areas in which the effects of overpopulation are being felt. Plenty of people who are in positions to make choices that would really help solve some of these problems are not people who are personally affected by them; they are not affected by food or water shortages and they breathe reasonably clear air. Sadly, all too often people are not motivated to help to solve problems unless they are in a position to see those problems play out in a way that resonates with them. Absent these conditions, some argue, dealing with overpopulation becomes a moral obligation of bigger entities like governments.

Still others argue that the problems that are seemingly posed by growing populations are not as serious as they may seem. With increased populations comes the increased opportunity for the creation of innovators. Innovators will find ways to solve the world's problems, just as they always have. Opponents of this line of thought argue that the problems that we are currently facing are far too severe and advanced for reliance on an innovator strategy to be a fair bet.

Few people outside of China advocate their particular implementation of their one child policy because of the human rights violations to which it led. Despite their disagreement with the way in which the ban was carried out, some think that governments should be doing *something* to at least *encourage* their citizens to have fewer children. On the other hand, one thing that is clear from the way that China's policy has played out is that there are unforeseen economic consequences of population control. These consequences affect a country's ability to provide education, health care, and other goods and services to their citizens and can impact that country's economic situation. All of these factors impact the lives of people in substantial ways and are deserving of moral consideration.

Related

Population Growth and Anti-Natalist Philosophy
Aug 1, 2019
In "Environment"

This & That: Assisting Evolution
Apr 25, 2016
In "Environment"

Time for a Paradigm Shift: COVID-19 and Human Consumption
Apr 29, 2020
In "Animals"

Rachel Robison-Greene

Rachel is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Utah State University. Her research interests include the nature of personhood and the self, animal minds and animal ethics, environmental ethics, and ethics and technology. She is the co-host of the pop culture and philosophy podcast I Think Therefore I Fan.